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Warrior Games: Wounded warriors soak up lessons from coach

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From the DoD Office Of Wounded Warrior Care and Transition Policy Blog

While there have been challenges, Dr. Aaron Moffett says his experience coaching the Navy/Coast Guard swim team for the annual [Warrior Games](#) has been the highlight of his career.



Dr. Aaron Moffett sits poolside doing mental preparations before the final races of the 2011 Warrior Games. (Photo courtesy of Joe Martinez Photography)

This week, Dr. Moffett reunited with the team in Colorado Springs, Colo. to give final guidance before the start of third annual Games. He hopes his team, half of whom are returning competitors, can at least match [last year's results](#) of nine gold medals, three silvers and one bronze.

Outside of coaching sailors and Coast Guardsmen, Dr. Moffett is an associate professor of kinesiology and director of the DisAbility Sports Festival at Cal State San Bernardino where he prepares youth and adults for the Paralympic Games.

He says it is coaching wounded warrior athletes from the pool deck that gives him honor.

“This is my way of giving back – to say thank you to them,” said Dr. Moffett.

If he only had to coach from one pool deck his responsibilities as a second-year coach would probably be easier. But with team members located around the country, the only chance Dr. Moffet has to meet in-person with his team is at a few training camps a year. The rest of his coaching is done over email or even text and that proves to be tough, he said. Making adaptations so his warrior athletes can be competitive swimmers, on the other hand, isn't a challenge.

“There aren't any major adaptations. I make accommodations across the board for a natural environment to make my swimmers in all areas that much better,” he said. Take the case of Navy Lieutenant Brad Snyder who is blind. Swimmers must know where the pool wall is, but that doesn't require vision said Dr. Moffet. “As a swimmer, you just know,” he added. So Dr. Moffett worked with Lt. Snyder on perfecting his stroke count so he could *just know*. Today,

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Lt. Snyder is one of the team’s fastest swimmers; he has even qualified for the national Paralympics team.

Navy veteran Nathan DeWalt worked with Dr. Moffett on adjusting his swim stroke. Due to his spinal cord injury, which left him with no control over his legs, he needed a natural way to help his back stay up and fine tuning his arm reach has really helped him improve.

Whether the men and women on the team are swimming to get better in events such as 50- and 100-meter freestyle, 50 meter backstroke or the 200 meter freestyle relay, Dr. Moffett says he works with each athlete on “feeling the water.”

“Swimmers shave to take dead skin cells off and put their nerve endings closer to the water,” said Dr. Moffett. “A good swimmer always wants to be pushing water instead of air. I’m working on making them better with these skills.”

Navy mineman Linda Simpson, a single leg amputee, is new to [adaptive sports](#) and she is listening to everything Dr. Moffett has to offer. He says her willingness to try new things and desire to soak everything in is fantastic for a coach.

The lessons learned at training camp and even through the phone have shown an impact not only in athletic reconditioning but in the mental and social health of these wounded, ill and injured warriors as well. Service members are flourishing in and out of the water because of their Warrior Games experience.

“They are working in a safe environment. Working on post traumatic stress disorder, talking freely inside the group and they take that home and talk to their families,” said Dr. Moffett. “They really start to reintegrate from the camps.”

Navy Lt. Melanie Monts de Oca competes with a lower body impairment while also recovering from a traumatic brain injury. She is a Warrior Games veteran whose experience is a great asset for the team, he said.

From veterans to rookies, Dr. Moffett is proud of his team and their improvements. It won’t be much longer before they have the chance to show their hard work has paid off, but Dr. Moffet is already humbled and hopes to see each of his athletes also get back to being successful in their communities.

“It’s an incredible feeling to work with the men and women on the Navy/Coast Guard team,” Dr. Moffett said. “They’ve done so much for us and yet they are saying ‘thank you’ to me.”

Follow the 2012 Warrior Games coverage on Facebook by clicking [here](#).

For more information about Navy Safe Harbor click [here](#).



Dr. Aaron Moffett talks to the Navy/Coast Guard swim team prior to the final races at the 2011 Warrior Games. (Photo courtesy of Joe Martinez Photography)

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